

# College English Teaching and Ability Grouping

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The purpose of this article<sup>1)</sup> is to illuminate an initial problem of English teaching at college and describe a device for the improvement of the present educational conditions.

Even at college, as long as it can not be denied that an essential part of English teaching is to be teaching the four skills of English, the devices for handling English classes, in addition to the study of the principles, methods and materials, should not be neglected.

The main problems of English teaching situations at college now being discussed in Japan are these<sup>2)</sup>:

- (1) The size of classes.
- (2) The length of a class hour.
- (3) The number of class hours.

From an ideal educational point of view, we would undoubtedly say this: With respect to (1) the size of classes, it is desirable to break up a large class of over sixty students, sometimes over one hundred, into smaller ones of twenty or less. (2) The present class hour of between ninety and one hundred minutes should be divided into two periods of between forty-five and fifty minutes. Short periods at frequent intervals in language teaching are far superior to long stretches at widely spaced intervals. (3) Since the rate of progress depends obviously upon the amount of time that can be allotted to the language, it is necessary to increase the number of class hours and introduce them into the junior and senior years.

Besides these points, however, another important device I would like to suggest for many college English classes today is:

- (4) Ability grouping (*or* Homogeneous classes).

That is, I would like to call close attention to the ability of students in a class, as well as the number of them. By 'ability,' I mean their existing language proficiency, rather than their language learning potentiality or language aptitude. This comes from the nature of college English teaching which occupies the last two years of eight years' English teaching at Japanese schools.

Our senior high school education today amounts to a quasi-compulsory one, and, in addition, there has been a tremendous increase in college enrollment. About 30 per cent of the high school graduates go on to college, and the number attending college has more than doubled during the last decade. Here a great difficulty arises from the fact that in the usual type of college, English is required of all students in the first two years of the general education course. We are expected to try to educate everyone together and provide adequately for the needs of every

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1) Based on a paper read at the General Meeting of the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), at Gakushuin University, on October 17, 1969.

2) These were the main themes of symposia at the General Meeting of JACET, at Tokyo University, on October 16, 1967.

student, though the difference in students' performances is far greater than it first appears to be. This is especially true in private colleges with as many as one thousand students or more in a single department. A pressing problem is how to challenge the student of above-average academic ability and at the same time take care of the needs of the average. It is, of course, obvious that no single pedagogical device will suffice for all these situations. It will also be worth while for us to reflect about fundamental questions such as whether English should be required at college, and whether high school graduates with poor academic records should be admitted to college. But, in order to improve a given situation and handle such classes more effectively, it is imperative that we adopt the homogeneous class system. At least, the difficulties I have just described can be partially overcome by using this technique.

Admittedly, one of the great advantages of modern mass education is that it permits an increasing number of students to have the opportunity to learn. It emphasizes that everyone should be given the opportunity to develop to his greatest potentiality. But, as the class becomes larger, many of the learners, especially those of language, are forced into a curriculum for which they are unsuited, and therefore they are apt to slow down the progress of the class or become dropouts. There is the problem of keeping the slower students from retarding the advanced ones or of keeping the latter from being satisfied with a level beneath their abilities. The problem becomes acute at the college level where differences in interests, backgrounds, vocational plans, and other factors, in addition to academic ability, enter in. Every teacher of a large class is haunted by the knowledge that, even with mass education, he ought to ensure the fullest participation of all students and give more individual attention to his students. Differences in ability and interest ought to be considered as much as possible. Ability grouping is a device which will, to a very considerable degree, meet this educational need. It groups together students of approximately the same level, and thus enables the teacher to proceed in terms designed particularly for that level. The first three problems mentioned above, namely, (1) the size of classes, (2) the length of a class hour, and (3) the number of class hours, seem somewhat insurmountable under the present system and it appears that the situation will continue unchanged for some time to come. However, this problem of ability grouping can be safely said to be rather easy to solve, if it is attempted.

As it is, oddly enough, few colleges have tried homogeneous classes in English so far. A recent report<sup>3)</sup> of the Japan League of Private Colleges says that only three out of fifty-one colleges in the League have adopted these sort of classes.

What are the reasons why homogeneous classes have not been favored at colleges, then? The main reasons seem to be:

- (1) Ability grouping will give a sense of inferiority to the slower students, and create an unfavorable educational atmosphere.
- (2) Ability grouping enforces discrimination because of ability, and it would be inconsistent with the spirit of equal and democratic education.
- (3) There will be no one in the class to spark the group to do something better. Advanced students and less-advanced students will develop side by side in a single class.

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3) Japan League of Private Colleges (ed.), *Foreign Language Teaching at College* (1968). Material for the 4th Annual Meeting of Foreign Language Teaching, at Shigaku Kaikan, on October 2-4, 1968.

These are the arguments that are used by the opponents of ability grouping<sup>4)</sup>. We must not, however, overlook the misunderstandings involved here. There is, at least, little attention paid to the difference between teaching of English and teaching of other subjects, or college education and high school education. For the improvement of the present English teaching situation, especially at the college level, I dare to suggest that we should confidently employ homogeneous classes for the following reasons:

- (1) Since a language is arbitrary and relative, rather than logical and absolute, learning English is a matter of habit, rather than a matter of science. It has nothing to do directly with the students' innate disposition or personality. A student who has a good command of Japanese is also considered to have a latent ability in English.
- (2) English, however, has been an elective course by law in junior high schools. And college students do not always graduate from a general high school course which actually offers college-preparatory training. Therefore many students do not have the same foundation in English as others.
- (3) Furthermore, a remarkably increasing number of college students in this country has brought about a larger discrepancy in English ability between advanced and less-advanced students. Teaching them together is becoming virtually impossible.
- (4) In general, a sense of inferiority or superiority is not a fatal disadvantage which ability grouping alone entails. Dr. Kanji Hatano states from a psychological point of view that a failure to group classes homogeneously will give a sense of inferiority to the slower students all the more, if there is a great discrepancy in ability within a class<sup>5)</sup>.
- (5) Homogeneous classes as an effective teaching device have been neglected because they have appeared, on the surface, to run counter to a democratic education. But as is stated in Article 26 of The Constitution of Japan and Article 3 of The Fundamental Law of Education ('All people shall have the right to receive an equal education correspondent to their ability.'), a democratic education means providing equally to all people an education corresponding to each person's ability in order to develop his own greatest potentiality. There is always the danger that 'an equal education' may be misinterpreted to mean 'the same education' regardless of differences in ability and need. Ability grouping should not be considered as discrimination, but as a way of respecting each student as a person, just as in a physical education course where students are often separated into different classes according to sex or according to their physical conditions.
- (6) Ability grouping is an educational device to avoid a large discrepancy in English ability within a class, and not an attempt to impose a uniformity which would disregard personal individualities.

Even in a homogeneous class, however, many problems would remain. No matter what type of ability grouping we try, it will fail if the following are not kept in mind.

- (1) It is advisable from our own experience<sup>6)</sup> that the students should be grouped in two

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4) E. g., Albert H. Marckwardt, *Advice and Comment on College English Teachers in Japan* (JACET, 1968), pp. 4f; Japan League of Private Colleges (ed.), *Report on the Fourth Annual Meeting of Foreign Language Teachers* (1968), p. 40.

5) Kanji Hatano, 'English Learning and IQ,' *The English Teachers' Magazine* (Taishukan), Dec. 1958.

6) We have grouped homogeneously in English courses at Momoyama Gakuin University since 1963.

or three levels of classes at most (not more) on the basis of existing language proficiency, so that there will be no great discrepancy in the ability of individual member of a class.

- (2) Ability grouping should not intensify needless competition among students as was seen before the war. It must be such that it ensures the fullest participation of all students, and leads to classes equally effective for advanced students, less-advanced students, and teachers. Regrouping is not necessarily needed during the two years of the general education course.
- (3) A teacher should try to teach both the advanced and less-advanced classes with the same text. Differences in ability are to be taken care of as far as possible by variation in the amount of work covered. It is advisable that a student's achievement should be evaluated objectively, regardless of the level of his class, rather than relatively in a single class.
- (4) All students who have a command of Japanese are to be considered to have a latent ability in English, too. Teachers should always bear in mind that a student's ability in English has nothing to do directly with his whole personality.
- (5) Teachers should guard against a sense of superiority and casualness on the part of advanced students, rather than a sense of inferiority which less-advanced students may have.
- (6) Success in using this device depends mainly upon the teacher's belief and attitude in handling classes.

Thus, ability grouping will permit both advanced and less-advanced students to progress at their own rate corresponding to their own ability. It will likewise help to produce effective teaching conditions both for teachers and students.

The further advantages of this device should be mentioned:

- (1) The device will be of help in having students realize the particular character of a language which is different from many other subjects.
- (2) It will also lead a student to cultivate a strict and honest attitude of mind in seeing his own ability as it is, which is especially essential for those who intend to pursue an academic study at college.

Above, I compared homogeneous classes in English to separate classes of boys, girls and the handicapped in physical education. There are, of course, common elements running through both situations. But, at the same time, it must not be overlooked that there is at least one clear difference between them. That is, sex or physical handicaps of students are never attributed to teachers of physical education; on the other hand, there can be no question that the personality and the linguistic ability of English teachers (especially their proficiency in English teaching) have always had a profound and lasting effect on the English ability of the students. In this sense, we would do well to constantly bear in mind that essentially the problem of ability grouping is nothing but the problem of the ability of the teachers themselves. If we do this we will avoid falling into the error of thinking that mere technical devices are the final answer to all language-teaching problems.